Speech from the Throne 2008

Delivered on the Occasion of the Opening of

The Second Session of
the Twenty Sixth Legislature
Province of Saskatchewan

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Lieutenant Governor of Saskatchewan

A STRONGER SASKATCHEWAN. A BETTER LIFE

MR. SPEAKER, MEMBERS OF THE LEGISLATURE, HONOURED GUESTS, PEOPLE OF SASKATCHEWAN:

Welcome to the opening of the Second Session of the Twenty-Sixth Legislature.

This year has seen profound change for the better in our province.

Saskatchewan has been enjoying a rebirth.

We are in a period of growth we have not seen in decades.

While other economies are experiencing a significant downturn, Saskatchewan continues to experience economic strength, opportunity and prosperity.

My government has adopted a balanced approach to sustaining and managing this growth — an approach characterized by fiscal prudence, investment in infrastructure and a commitment to innovation.

The goal of this balanced approach is to ensure that the prosperity and growth in our province is not just a fleeting, temporary phenomena but rather a permanent fixture.

Our goal is a stronger Saskatchewan.

Saskatchewan has been richly endowed with the gifts of providence.

And my government feels a strong and sincere obligation to build a better life in which all are able to share in these blessings.

This is the theme of the Speech from the Throne and of the upcoming session:

A Stronger Saskatchewan.

A Better Life.

THIS YEAR COUNTRY

For as long as I can remember, people have called our province "Next Year Country."

Today, I am pleased to report that in our Saskatchewan, next year has arrived.

This year, Saskatchewan is expected to lead the nation in economic growth.

This year, Saskatchewan is number one in wholesale trade growth, export sales growth and retail sales growth.

This year, more people are working in Saskatchewan than ever before.

This year, our population is growing at its fastest rate in over 50 years.

This year, more of our young people are choosing to stay in Saskatchewan, and moving back from other provinces.

Because of this tremendous growth and new economic activity, government revenues have grown by over $3 billion.

This money rightfully belongs to everyone in Saskatchewan.

This is why my government asked the people of Saskatchewan for advice on the next steps it should take.

Many people from all across our province have responded.

Their wise and steady counsel has built on my government's vision for reduction of debt, lower taxes, better infrastructure and sound financial management.

A STRONGER SASKATCHEWAN THROUGH DEBT REDUCTION AND FISCAL PRUDENCE

Saskatchewan people understand that for many years, our province's growth and prosperity was held back by a crushing burden of debt.

Recent events south of the border have served to vividly illustrate how unreasonable levels of debt can bring a powerful economy to its knees.

One of the first acts of my government was to enshrine in law its commitment to debt reduction.

The Growth and Financial Security Act dedicates one-half of any government surplus to debt reduction.

Already, this new law, coupled with the province's strong economic performance, has enabled my government to cut the provincial debt by one-third.

Many Saskatchewan people asked us to go further – to ensure a stronger Saskatchewan by reducing debt, and saving millions of dollars in interest payments now and in the future.

It was good advice.

My government will commit an additional $1 billion from the province's Growth and Financial Security Fund to pay down debt.

When my government took office, debt stood at nearly $7 billion.

By the end of this fiscal year, my government will have reduced the debt burden by almost 40 per cent.

This act alone will save Saskatchewan taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars in interest payments in the coming years.

That money will stay in the province and be re-invested in Saskatchewan, rather than being paid to banks on Bay Street and Wall Street.

My government will continue to work towards debt reduction with the goal of debt elimination.

Because a debt-free Saskatchewan will be a stronger Saskatchewan.

Our province, with its rich resource and commodities base, is well-positioned to weather the current economic storm.

My government expects continued growth.

But, it is also wise to be prepared for the unexpected.

Even with the significant tax relief, infrastructure and debt reduction measures outlined in this Throne Speech, my government will continue to maintain a significant cash balance in the Growth and Financial Security Fund.

My government is currently forecasting this balance to be almost $2 billion at the end of the current fiscal year.

This will be the rock on which we secure Saskatchewan's future.

This is our province's financial insurance policy.

In today's global economic storm, the winds of uncertainty may continue to blow.

However, here in Saskatchewan, we are used to the wind blowing.

And we are built to withstand these winds.

We expect our economy to flourish and prosperity to continue, even in these unstable times.

Maintaining this cash balance is a very different approach, when compared to the policies that contributed to the economic meltdown in the United States.

Their government is increasing debt.

My government is paying down debt.

And when their government reached a point of crisis, their only option was to borrow even more.

But, Saskatchewan people should feel secure in the knowledge that they have a $2 billion fiscal insurance policy to ensure we are prepared to weather any possible impact on the provinces revenues.

A STRONGER SASKATCHEWAN THROUGH BETTER INFRASTRUCTURE.

Many Saskatchewan people also told us that debt reduction cannot be the only priority.

They asked us to learn from other jurisdictions that allowed their provincial infrastructure to fall behind the pace of a growing economy and population.

Last spring, in its first budget, my government announced an unprecedented $1 billion infrastructure investment called "Ready for Growth".

Because of this initiative, the task of restoring roads, schools and hospitals after years of neglect has started in earnest.

However, there is still much to do.

And this is why my government will increase its commitment to rebuilding Saskatchewan's infrastructure by 50 per cent in the 2009 budget, to a total of $1.5 billion.

Investing in highways, schools, universities, hospitals and other vital infrastructure projects will ensure a stronger

Saskatchewan and a better life for our people.

A BETTER LIFE THROUGH LOWER TAXES FOR EVERYONE

Many Saskatchewan people also told us that while they are excited and optimistic about the growth and new activity in our province, they are also concerned about the rising cost of living.

It costs more to fill up your car with gasoline.

It costs more to buy or rent a home, and to heat that home.

Everyone in our province, but in particular those with lower incomes, is feeling the pinch.

My government believes broadly-based tax cuts are the best and most effective way to address the rising cost of living and ensure a better life for Saskatchewan people.

The resources that are driving our growing surplus belong to everyone—the benefits should be shared by everyone.

That is why my government will provide the largest income tax cut in Saskatchewan history by raising personal income tax exemptions — the amount you can earn tax free before you start to pay income tax.

A family of four in Saskatchewan will now have the highest level of personal tax exemptions of any province in Canada.

This is a significant advantage for those who live in our province, and to attract new people and families to Saskatchewan.

While every taxpayer in Saskatchewan will benefit from these changes, the greatest positive impact will be for low income individuals and families – those hardest hit by the rising cost of living.

And 80,000 Saskatchewan people will no longer pay provincial income taxes at all.

My government also recognizes that many low income people in Saskatchewan — students, seniors and others — already pay no income tax.

Since they face an increasing cost of living and pay other provincial taxes, they also deserve to share in our prosperity.

This is why my government will introduce a new Low Income Tax Credit.

This new tax credit will replace and significantly increase the current Saskatchewan Sales Tax Credit.

When taken as a whole, these measures will reduce taxes for Saskatchewan people by $300 million per year.

These measures are affordable and sustainable, because of our growing economy, increases in revenues and reduced interest payments on the debt.

They will help to address the rising cost of living and help create a better life for Saskatchewan people.

A STRONGER SASKATCHEWAN THROUGH INNOVATION

The author and columnist Thomas Friedman says the most important renewable fuel a society can create is an eco-system of innovation.

In a world that is starving for safe, secure and reliable sources of environmentally sustainable energy, Saskatchewan must begin creating just such an eco-system of innovation.

We must have the ability to conduct research into better ways of generating solar, wind and nuclear power.

My government has a vision for Saskatchewan leading in the research and production of cellulosic ethanol from grass, straw and forest waste products.

We must take current energy production and re-imagine it with an urgency heretofore not seen.

This will require a trained workforce.

This will require a cutting-edge scientific and technical infrastructure at our universities.

And this will require vision and leadership.

To that end, my government in this session will introduce an Act to establish "Innovation Saskatchewan" as a special operating agency.

And my government will make a significant financial investment in the innovation agenda.

"Innovation Saskatchewan" will assist in coordinating, focusing and supporting research activities in our province.

It will place a special emphasis on facilitating the commercialization of innovation and technology.

The goal of "Innovation Saskatchewan" will be to enhance this province's competitiveness and productivity, which will ensure growth and prosperity now and in the future.

A Saskatchewan where innovation flourishes will be a stronger Saskatchewan.

And it will allow us to build a better life, not just for the people of this province, but for the nation and the world.

My government will also continue advancing innovation projects that have already been announced.

There will soon be an announcement regarding the short list for technology suppliers under the SaskPower Clean Coal project.

And, through the formation of new partnerships, Saskatchewan will now begin to explore the advantages and innovations that can come from the value-added processing of this province's rich uranium resource.

A STRONGER SASKATCHEWAN, A BETTER LIFE THROUGH WORKFORCE TRAINING

Saskatchewan needs to continue building a knowledge economy.

To quote former MIT Management and Economics Professor Lester Thurow, "the old foundations of success are gone."

Societies must reorganize to generate a knowledge economy.

According to Thurow, building a knowledge-based economy requires large public investments in education, infrastructure, research and development because building a knowledge economy is both an individual and a team sport.

In Saskatchewan, we are well positioned in this regard.

We have Canada's only Synchrotron.

We are home to one-third of Canada's agricultural bio-tech industry.

We have world-class work being done at the Petroleum Technology Research Centre, including the internationally renowned carbon capture and sequestration project near Weyburn.

We have the University of Saskatchewan's Vaccine and Infectious Disease Organizations—VIDO, and InterVac-- world leaders in their fields.

My government is committed to continue building on investments in our post-secondary education system.

Work will be done to foster even greater cooperation among universities, regional colleges and technical institutes.

My government will reward innovative new approaches like the creation of cooperative and applied learning opportunities that help better connect our students to the labour market.

My government will also introduce improvements to the Graduate Retention Program, so that even more post-secondary graduates will choose to start their careers and build their futures in Saskatchewan.

Saskatchewan has grown by over 16,000 people in the past year.

More people are moving in than moving out, but we still have thousands of unfilled employment opportunities.

Saskatchewan no longer has a job shortage.

Today, we have a people shortage.

We need more skilled workers.

My government acknowledges the crucial role that First Nations and Métis must play in the future Saskatchewan workforce.

To date, participation rates by this important segment of our population have been lower than hoped for.

Most importantly, my government is committed to providing First Nations and Métis with the educational opportunities, the skills training and employment options that will provide them with the tools to become full partners in our common future.

My government has also been active across Canada and around the world in efforts to recruit new employees and bring home former Saskatchewan residents.

These efforts will continue in the coming year.

Further, my government is also focused on a new immigration strategy.

This strategy is aimed at streamlining the process for entry into Saskatchewan, making it easier to live in a location that holds the best promise of the brightest future and highest quality of life.

Through these measures, my government will continue to deliver a clear message to all those who are looking to new opportunities in our province.

Saskatchewan is a great place to make a living.

It's an even better place to make a life.

A BETTER LIFE THROUGH EDUCATION

Efforts to engage First Nations and Métis students will extend throughout the educational system.

My government recently announced that treaty education will become a required part of the curriculum throughout all grades in Saskatchewan schools.

My government will also move forward through initiatives like the Provincial Panel on Student Achievement.

Saskatchewan will also be leading the Aboriginal Education Summit in 2009, bringing together education ministers and officials from across Canada.

There is no question that education is key to ensuring a stronger Saskatchewan and a better life.

My government has already made significant progress in addressing the infrastructure deficit created by years of neglect in the education system.

So far, over $117 million has been committed in the budget to new construction and refurbishing existing schools.

An additional $60 million was announced after the budget, for projects that will begin in 2009.

Not only does this provide our students with enhanced facilities, it also benefits entire communities.

My government is committed to ensuring our schools have the best technology available and our children have the knowledge and the skills to meet the challenges of life in the 21st century.

My government is also committed to assuring our libraries have the best available technology to assist in the important role they play in providing early learning programs, literacy training and support for community development.

To that end, my government will soon be announcing an important new initiative that will ensure libraries and schools are able to meet these growing challenges.

A BETTER LIFE FOR CHILDREN AND THEIR PARENTS

Our youngest citizens and their parents also need our continued support.

We know that these investments in the earliest years pay the largest dividends.

Growth and continued prosperity will mean increasing demand for child care spaces.

This is why my government has already invested in 500 new child care spaces, which are opening right now in communities across the province.

An additional investment of $1.7 million in the 2008-2009 budget year will increase the number of licensed child care spaces to 10,400.

Parents wishing to participate in Saskatchewan's growing economy, or wishing to further their education, will continue to have a safe place to take their children.

My government is also in the process of increasing the number of pre-kindergarten programs by almost 25 per cent.

That brings the total number of these programs to 193, serving over 3,000 children.

This is work that is in progress, and work that will continue.

Another important priority of my government is to fulfill its promise to reduce the education portion of property taxes.

This too will help sustain economic growth and ensure all women and men across the province benefit from our prosperity.

The Legislative Secretary to the Minister of Education continues to work diligently on this issue.

He has conducted meetings with people and organizations in the education field and has also made a call for submissions from those who want to have a further opportunity to make their voices heard on this important issue.

A final report on this important issue will be delivered to the Minister of Education in early 2009 – a report that will form the basis for reforming the education tax system and reducing the education portion of property tax.

A BETTER LIFE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Over the past decade, an unacceptable situation was allowed to develop regarding access to needed support programs for people with disabilities.

A wait list for these programs has grown to include over four hundred women and men.

The problem has largely been ignored, until now.

During this session, my government will announce a plan to address this wait list and ensure persons with disabilities receive the support they need.

In the next budget year, it is the intention of my government also to provide equitable income support for women and men with disabilities.

My government is also committed to ensuring persons receiving social assistance can become more independent, and that our system itself is not a barrier to independence.

Changes will be introduced to increase the amount people can earn before their support payments are reduced.

My government will continue to consult with persons with disabilities, to make sure they have a voice in the development of new measures to address their needs.

A BETTER LIFE FOR SENIORS

My government desires a better life for Saskatchewan seniors.

However, some are facing significant challenges as costs increase.

The Saskatchewan Income Assistance program was designed to help low income seniors maintain their quality of life.

Sadly, the benefit provided to seniors under this program has not been increased since 1992.

That is not good enough.

During this session, my government will provide an increase to this important support program.

A BETTER LIFE FOR AT RISK CHILDREN

Poverty is placing Saskatchewan children at risk.

Children of poor families aren't as healthy.

They aren't as successful in school.

They have a higher risk of getting involved in dangerous activities.

Right now in Saskatchewan, some 20 per cent of our 43,000 children live in poverty.

This cannot be allowed to continue.

The tax changes my government has announced represent the most aggressive public policy initiative available for reducing child poverty.

Putting more money back in the hands of parents will help them address their children's needs.

However, my government will not stop there.

It will continue efforts aimed at improving programs and services for at risk children in Saskatchewan.

As part of this effort, Saskatchewan's Children and Family Services Act, as well as the Adoption Act will be renewed and improved.

A BETTER LIFE THROUGH AFFORDABLE, ACCESSIBLE HOUSING

My government responded earlier this year to the housing challenges facing Saskatchewan people with the Affordable Housing Task Force.

That report was well received, and an aggressive initial response was undertaken.

Shelter rates for low income renters were increased.

Living allowances under the integrated student loan program were also increased.

So were per diem rates paid to organizations operating emergency shelters.

During this session, my government will continue responding to the Task Force's recommendations.

Legislation will be introduced to create a new, modern and more responsive board for the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation.

Further, my government will also be developing a new capital program for the Housing Corporation in the upcoming year.

Another recommendation of the Task Force was better protection for renters facing a rent increase.

My government will address this recommendation through amendments to the Residential Tenancies Amendment Act.

COMMUNITY BASED ORGANIZATIONS – BUILDING BETTER LIVES

Agencies that provide vital services for vulnerable people have received considerable attention from my government.

These agencies and the 6,000 people who work in them across Saskatchewan are on the front line of providing much-needed services to some of the most vulnerable people in our province.

Earlier this fall, these organizations were the recipients of the largest ever single year increase to assist in the recruitment of new staff, and the retention of existing staff.

Starting with the 2009-2010 budget, my government will enter into long term stable funding agreements with these important partners.

A STRONGER SASKATCHEWAN THROUGH BETTER HEALTH CARE

For over a decade, Saskatchewan's health care infrastructure has been decaying due to neglect and under-funding.

Repairing these hospitals, clinics and long-term care facilities is now an urgent priority.

That is why my government has invested $100 million into improving health care facilities, for the benefit of patients and the people who work in these facilities.

My government will soon be making further announcements regarding much needed health capital projects in our province.

My government has also been working diligently on its promise to increase the number of nurses and doctors in our health care system.

By the end of March 2009, the Ministry anticipates all 400 Filipino nurses recently offered employment to be working in Saskatchewan.

The task of resolving long-standing workplace and nursing shortage issues will also continue through the Nursing Partnership Table—the only one of its kind in Canada.

Nurses are a critical component of the health care system

So too are doctors.

Increasing the supply of locally trained physicians is a priority for the Ministry of Health.

My government has already added 24 new undergraduate seats and 24 new residency seats.

Soon, it will be unveiling plans to meet the commitment of adding 40 new undergraduate seats and 60 new residency positions.

My government will introduce a comprehensive physician recruitment strategy that will include accelerated training and licensing of international medical graduates.

There will also be mechanisms put in place to better support rural doctors.

However, the most important person in the health care system is the person the system serves – the patient.

Rather than continuing with a system that asks patients to fit in, work will soon begin on redesigning health care to better

match the needs of patients.

The vehicle for achieving this goal will be the Patient First Review.

My government will also fulfill its promise to implement patient exit surveys to measure the quality of the patient's experience with the health care system.

These two initiatives will shed a spotlight on the needs of patients and help develop a strategy to fill any existing gaps in care.

A health care system that puts the patient first will mean a better life for all Saskatchewan people.

A BETTER LIFE, A GREENER ENVIRONMENT

My government believes that the goals of a growing economy and a greener province go hand in hand.

That is why we are committed to exploring alternative energy sources, like clean coal and nuclear power.

These alternatives have the potential to create tremendous economic activity and growth, while at the same time significantly reducing our environmental footprint.

Saskatchewan residents also have an opportunity to do their part—and save money—by accessing a comprehensive list of energy conservation programs.

In the weeks ahead, my government will be expanding that list to include a new program that encourages homeowners to install geothermal heating systems.

During this session, my government will unveil an effective response to the challenges facing Saskatchewan as a result of efforts to control greenhouse gas emissions in our country.

The goal of my government is to ensure that carbon offsets or penalties imposed by the federal government on heavy greenhouse gas emitters will stay in our province to fund research into innovative new measures that will actually lead to a reduction in these emissions.

Fresh, clean water is essential for a high quality of life in our province.

People all across Saskatchewan need to know they will have access to safe and reliable water, now and in the future.

My government will begin work on a comprehensive water management plan, to meet this important need.

A BETTER LIFE FOR FIRST NATIONS AND MÉTIS

My government is keenly aware that various ministries, through their initiatives and activities, touch the lives of many First Nations and Métis on an almost daily basis.

Therefore, my government will direct that each Ministry embraces this reality as they go about their daily activities.

For the past year, my government has been working in close cooperation with First Nations, Métis and industry leaders on the development of new consultation guidelines for future projects.

Important results from these consultations are expected during this session.

My government will also work with First Nations and Métis, the federal government as well as other provinces and territories to ensure that Jordan's Principle becomes the guiding principle for providing care to our children.

This principle holds that no child should be denied medical or other necessary services because of a dispute with governments over who has jurisdiction.

A STRONGER SASKATCHEWAN THROUGH SAFER HIGHWAYS

This year, my government made a significant commitment to rebuilding our province's crumbling highway system.

Over 1,400 kilometers of work has been done this construction year.

However, much more work needs to be done.

A significant portion of my government's $1.5 billion infrastructure commitment will go toward fixing our highways.

However, better long-term planning is also needed.

During this session of the Legislature, my government will introduce its promised five-year rolling plan for highway construction, and the expansion of the primary weight highway network.

This plan will use clearly defined criteria to establish a method of determining the order in which highways should be repaired.

Safe highways remain a top priority of my government, as does my government's commitment to provide historic funding increases to our transportation system, including rural roads, to address the inherited infrastructure deficit.

STRONGER CROWNS – BUILDING A BETTER SASKATCHEWAN

Saskatchewan's Crown Corporations must have a clear focus on providing the best possible service to Saskatchewan people at the lowest possible cost.

In recent years, this focus has been diverted by money-losing ventures outside Saskatchewan's borders.

During this session, my government will introduce a new policy for Crown Corporation investments — one that shifts the focus to development within the province.

In the past, governments have adopted an out-of-province investment strategy that saw millions of taxpayers' dollars gambled and lost in other parts of Canada and around the world.

In the coming weeks, my government will be releasing a report showing how, for the most part, these investments were not successful and did not benefit the people of Saskatchewan.

Building a stronger Saskatchewan will require a change in approach – a "Saskatchewan First" investment policy.

Soon, my government will also be receiving the findings of a feasibility study into nuclear power by a leading company in nuclear energy, Bruce Power.

My government believes it is time for fulsome consideration of the potential of nuclear power in Saskatchewan.

A STRONGER AGRICULTURE SECTOR, A BETTER LIFE FOR FARM FAMILIES

After much hard work and effort, the busy fall harvest season is, for the most part, over for Saskatchewan's farm families.

Yields are good, but input costs have increased.

One cost that my government can influence is property taxes.

Farm families should look forward to our report on the education tax system, and the reduction of the education portion of property taxes.

My government plans to participate fully and immediately in federal programs designed to help farm families.

The Ministry of Agriculture will move ahead with plans to bring administration of AgriStability (formerly known as CAIS) to Saskatchewan.

This will result in a better program—one that is more responsive to the unique needs and challenges facing Saskatchewan producers.

My government is also committed to strengthening Crop Insurance, giving better value to those who rely on this important program.

Improvements will be introduced in the new year.

These improvements will be based on the input received during the recent review of the Crop Insurance program.

Some sectors of Saskatchewan's livestock industry are facing economic challenges.

This is particularly true of the cattle and hog sectors.

Long-term strategies for growth must be developed in cooperation with industry.

This work is underway.

My government has demonstrated its support for agriculture with its commitment to providing long-term, secure water supplies in Saskatchewan's south-west.

This is an area of our province where producers have endured a number of years of drought.

Compensation levels have been increased under the Farm and Ranch Water Infrastructure Program.

My government will also expand Extension Services in rural Saskatchewan.

STRONGER COMMUNITIES BY WORKING WITH MUNICIPALITIES

My government is working with Saskatchewan municipalities to help them serve their citizens and meet the challenges and opportunities of growth.

Communities across Saskatchewan recently received the first round of funding under the Saskatchewan Infrastructure Growth Initiative.

$75 million in interest-free loans was distributed to communities to help them meet the growing demand for more residential lots and infrastructure.

This first year of the program was extremely successful.

As a result, my government will move forward in future years, confident that this program meets important municipal priorities.

My government recognizes that many municipalities are dealing with an infrastructure deficit, just like the provincial government.

This is largely a result of many years of significant cuts to municipal revenue sharing.

That is why my government increased revenue sharing in its first budget, and provided a further increase after the budget, when revenue numbers showed improvement.

That is why my government is committed to a long-term solution by creating a new revenue sharing agreement with municipalities that ties municipal revenue sharing to the province's own source revenue.

My government expects to have a new revenue sharing formula in place by the 2009 budget.

A STRONGER DEMOCRACY

During the course of the last election, my government promised fairer elections by removing the advantages held by the governing party – advantages that led to political gamesmanship and voter cynicism.

Last session, my government fulfilled its promise to establish set election dates.

This session, my government will fulfill its promise to restrict the amount of government advertising in the period leading up to an election.

Such a move will eliminate the possibility of future governments attempting to increase that level of advertising to gain a political advantage.

During this session, my government will also introduce legislation allowing the people of our province to elect the next nominee to the Senate.

With this process, we are placing an important democratic tool into the hands of our citizens, and taking an important step in moving toward a democratic, elected Senate.

A BETTER, SAFER LIFE IN SASKATCHEWAN

My government is committed to cracking down on crime stemming from the activities of gangs.

Often, victims of gang violence and those with information about gangs are reluctant to step forward.

These witnesses may have information that is valuable to these cases, but they may not qualify under witness protection programs offered by the federal government.

To rectify this situation, my government will introduce a new Witness Protection Act.

The goal of this legislation will be to protect potential witnesses from threats of violence and intimidation.

My government will also strengthen existing laws relating to the seizure of property used in the commission of crimes, or the proceeds of crime.

This is another important measure in fighting organized crime and gang activity in our province.

These improvements come in addition to initiatives now in place, including the designation of full time security intelligence officers in correctional centres.

This change has made the management of gangs within correctional centres more focused and coordinated with police forces.

The Corrections, Public Safety and Policing ministry is also conducting a province-wide case file review of all serious violent offenders serving sentences in the community.

Some of these offenders may be involved in gang activity.

The purpose of the review is to ensure these offenders are receiving high levels of supervision and help identify possible gaps in service.

The Ministry is also working with Saskatchewan Police Services and the Criminal Intelligence Services of Saskatchewan to develop a gang database that will assist police services in the identification and tracking of gang members.

My government also remains committed to ensuring a greater police presence throughout Saskatchewan.

It is taking another step this year to keep a promise to fund 120 new police officers over the course of the four year mandate.

In the current budget year, provision has been made for 30 new officers, nine of whom are directed to a specialized investigation unit that gathers intelligence used to combat organized crime and gangs.

In the upcoming budget year, the ministry will again be funding at least 30 new officers.

Further, several of the new positions will be used to form part of a province-wide policing strategy, aimed at combating gang violence.

The new policing strategy will be announced in detail, later this year.

My government is aware these criminal organizations do not respect provincial or international boundaries.

This is why it is working with our neighbours to tackle the gang problem together.

A stronger Saskatchewan is one where law-abiding citizens are safe from the scourge of crime.

These measures are another step down that road.

My government will also keep another promise focused on the safety of seniors.

This initiative will help low income seniors make their homes safer through a complimentary home security audit, and the installation of basic security devices, like deadbolts and window latches.

A STRONGER SASKATCHEWAN THROUGH BETTER COMMUNICATIONS

All of Saskatchewan requires access to high-speed internet and other services that make it easier to operate a business.

My government will develop a five-year plan to encourage the expansion and availability of broadband services to rural communities to enhance their prosperity and quality of life.

My government is committed to making it easier for businesses to get information and assistance from ministries.

This is why work is being done now on a project that will provide easy, one stop access to information, programs and services.

This project will see the creation of a web-based government-wide gateway that is aligned with the needs of the business community.

This will make it easier to start or expand a business in Saskatchewan.

A BETTER LIFE THROUGH TOURISM AND ARTS

Our Saskatchewan provincial parks are a real treasure.

They offer nearby recreational opportunities for our residents, at a reasonable cost.

The number of visits to our provincial parks jumped by 11 per cent in 2008, exceeding the three million visit mark for the first time.

My government will continue to upgrade our provincial parks so that they attract even more visitors.

My government will also keep its commitment for increased tourism funding.

During this session, my government is committed to the introduction of a new "Arts Professions Act."

This act will increase protection for artists and their intellectual property.

It will require written contracts between those who engage the services of artists and the artists themselves.

And it will require that these contracts acknowledge clearly the transfer of any rights from professional artists.

A TRIBUTE

While 2008 has been a tremendous year for our province, we have also been reminded that the freedom and way of life that we enjoy comes with a cost.

We are truly blessed to have so many brave young men and women willing to pay that cost on our behalf.

Today, the people of Saskatchewan and my government say thank you.

Thank you to all who serve our country.

And thank you to Sergeant Prescott Shipway, Corporal Dustin Wasden, and Master Corporal Josh Roberts, all of whom made the supreme sacrifice this past year while serving our country in Afghanistan.

Saskatchewan's history is replete with examples of men and women who have sacrificed everything for the betterment of others.

Their names are engraved on the war memorials and cenotaphs across our province, but their real legacy is etched into the lives and the freedoms that each one of us enjoys every day, here, in the best province in the best country in the world.

We honour them today and pray that their remaining loved ones and friends find comfort in years ahead, by knowing this sacrifice was not in vain.

As a further tribute, during this session my government will introduce measures to honour returning soldiers as well as the sons and daughters of those who have made the ultimate sacrifice.

This will take the form of a scholarship for post-secondary education.

CONCLUSION

During this session the Public Accounts for the last fiscal year, together with the Estimates for the new year commencing April 1, 2009, will also be submitted to you.

The French aviator and author, Antoine de Saint Exupery said this:

Your task is not to foresee the future, but to enable it.

Today, Saskatchewan people are transforming our province – from stagnation to growth, from a have-not to a have province, from a place where more people move out to a place where more people move in.

This transformation is evident everywhere you go in our great province.

There is tremendous optimism in Saskatchewan today, and we don't ever want to turn back.

My government's role is to enable the future, to enable Saskatchewan people to continue this fundamental positive change in our province.

My government's role is to ensure Saskatchewan people have the tools and the resources they need to chart their own course and follow their own dreams.

Today in Saskatchewan, our people have a million different dreams.

Actually, 1,015,985 to be exact.

But in one way or another, we all share the same dream – the dream of a stronger Saskatchewan, and a better life.

And everyday in the new Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan people are making that dream come true.

I leave you now to the business of the Session, with full confidence that you will favourably discharge your duties and responsibilities.

May divine providence continue to bless our province and guide this Assembly in all of its deliberations.

God Bless Saskatchewan. God Bless Canada. And God Save the Queen.